

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by Joseph W. Barnes, *City Historian*

Vol. XXXVI

July, 1974

No. 3

Obediah Dogberry

ROCHESTER FREETHINKER

By Joseph W. Barnes

Obediah Dogberry, opponent of intolerance, hypocrisy, and fanaticism (as he perceived these things) published an eight-page weekly in Rochester called the *Liberal Advocate* from February, 1832, until November, 1834.¹ His journal belonged to a class of newspapers known by historians as the freethought press, which flourished in America between 1825 and 1850.² Like other freethinkers, Dogberry was often upset and sometimes outraged by the intensity of religious emotionalism common in his day. Even in an overgrown village, as Rochester was in 1832, there was no shortage of issues with which a man like Dogberry could concern himself. The "orthodox" Christian establishment behaved itself in a way designed to offend the sensibilities of the liberal Obediah Dogberry. Clergymen and lay leaders made vicious verbal attacks on Catholics, Universalists, and "infidels"; Dogberry called for toleration and "temperance in opinion." While Christians called for abolition of the theater, abstinence from liquor, and a variety of reforms to be achieved through political means, Dogberry and his associates called for strict separation of church and state. In Rochester as elsewhere,

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by the Rochester Public Library, distributed free at the Library, by mail 50 cents per year. Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14604

Americans were preoccupied with questioning the moral order of their society. Their concerns ranged freely among politics, religion, and ethics; the full separation of these three spheres was left to a later century, our own.

The Christian Establishment

It would be difficult to exaggerate the role of religion in the lives of most Rochesterians in the 1830s. Many of the 10,000 inhabitants who crowded into this western village by 1832 brought with them the uncompromising Presbyterianism of rural New England.³ Others hailed from different parts of New York State, or Pennsylvania, and adhered to an Episcopalianism only slightly less preoccupied with weighty concerns over sin, grace, eternal salvation, and the literal truth of the Bible. These two dominant sects, along with lesser numbers of Methodists and Baptists, constituted a self-recognized orthodox Christian establishment. Although there was interdenominational rivalry (in part a reflection of broader cleavages within the village community) and even a number of schisms within particular churches, doctrinal differences among the orthodox tended to be blurry.⁴

Differences of opinion among the orthodox churches were obscured by an over-riding evangelical impulse. To clergy and laity alike, the difference between a Methodist and a Baptist seemed less important than the immediate challenge of saving souls. American Protestantism in the early 1830s was at the summit of a revivalistic era. Itinerant clergymen like Charles G. Finney conducted great "revivals of religion" at various locations, drawing thousands of the anxious and merely curious to hear compelling sermons. In larger settlements like Rochester and in tiny hamlets throughout western New York and the midwest persons met in midweek prayer meetings to consider their condition before God. At prayer meeting, revival, and regular Sunday church service a single theme, highly charged with emotion, was reiterated: sinners must

“lay themselves at the feet of Christ” and undergo thorough conversion or face hideous punishment after death for eternity.⁵

But revival meetings and the conversion of sinners were not the only concerns of Christian leaders. In Rochester, orthodox Protestants looked with alarm at the frenetic pace of social change characteristic of the time. During the first decades of the nineteenth century a vast migration of New England farmers and townsmen entered the former Indian lands of the Genesee region. In a little more than a single generation after 1789, as many as 1,000,000 former residents of Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut swelled the population of New York State.⁶ The main result of this immigration was to open new lands to the plow, but the creation of prosperous agricultural regions was interdependent with the appearance of mushrooming commercial and manufacturing settlements. Rochester’s population at the time of its incorporation as a village in 1817 numbered some 1,000. Eight years later, a state census revealed more than 5,000 inhabitants, and that figure was nearly doubled in the federal census of 1830.⁷ To conservative religious leaders, the diaspora of the faithful in the back country of New York was bad enough; conditions in booming towns like Rochester were even worse.

As its boastful journalists were fond of pointing out, not one of Rochester’s 5,000 residents in the mid-1820s had grown up in the place.⁸ In addition to the thousands who came to Rochester and stayed, untold numbers were transient visitors -- sturdy immigrants who stopped over on their way further west; young tradesmen and professionals who pulled up stakes after a year or two in search of brighter prospects; Irish laborers; traveling showmen and peddlers; scruffy boatmen passing through on the Erie Canal. Particularly after completion of the canal to Rochester in 1823, the town became a way station for migrants. All of this ebb and flow of humanity produced a strain on the stability which institutions like the church, the family, and the law were supposed to

maintain. One can imagine the horror with which community leaders, men with property, businesses, and church memberships, watched the growth of Sabbath-breaking, profanity, drunkenness, petty crime, and disrespect -- the inevitable accompaniments of a frontier boom town.⁹

One response to the moral dangers of life in the village was the construction of churches for the faithful, and the institutional strength of organized religion in early Rochester testifies to the vigorous beliefs of its supporters. Even before Hamlet Scrantom arrived as the first permanent settler of Rochester in 1812, some fifteen small churches served the spiritual needs of the scattered farmers in the area later to become Monroe County.¹⁰ For a few years Scrantom and his neighbors attended these country churches or met for prayer at the tailor shop of Jehiel Barnard. The First Presbyterian Church was organized in 1815, and in 1817 St. Luke's Episcopal. Within three years there were two more churches and a Quaker meeting -- five congregations for a population of less than 2,000. By 1832 growth and internal dissensions had spawned a Second, Third, and even "Free" Presbyterian Church, as well as a second Episcopal church. A conservative Baptist congregation was organized in 1827, and in 1831 the First Wesleyan Methodist Church constructed a great "Chapel," said to be the largest Methodist structure in the United States, at the present site of 50 West Main Street.¹¹ In 1832 a local newspaper estimated the combined seating capacities of the Rochester churches to be 7,160.¹²

In addition to their support of regular church organizations, pious Christians in the 1820s joined in a variety of cooperative ventures. Among the first were missionary societies, organized to lend aid to the "feeble churches of the west," such as those in Niagara County, considered to be a "wilderness."¹³ In 1821 a Monroe County Bible Society was formed. Its purpose was the distribution by sale or gift of Bibles, Testaments, and tracts. Repeated surveys undertaken by the Society during the 1820s revealed the absence of Bibles among

hundreds of local families, because of either poverty or Catholicism. Each year a renewed effort was made to supply every family in the county "destitute of Holy Scripture."¹⁴ Another early interdenominational effort was the promotion of Sunday Schools; not until after the mid-1820s did churches begin operating independent schools in competition with the Monroe Sabbath-School Union. One of the featured programs of the Union schools was an annual public competition to choose outstanding young scholars. Some notion of the type of instruction typical of the schools is suggested by the prize-winning effort of thirteen-year-old Jane Wilson, who in 1823 recited 1,650 Bible verses from memory.¹⁵

Josiah Bissell Jr., the village's most ardent lay advocate of Christian reform, was prominently involved in two interdenominational causes which were pushed vigorously in 1828. With the help of prosperous Christians in Rochester and elsewhere in the state, Bissell promoted a "pioneer" canal packet company and stagecoach company.¹⁶ Both pioneer enterprises were "six-day lines," pledged to halt operations on the Sabbath. Nominal Christians were challenged to demonstrate the sincerity of their "profession" by patronizing the six-day lines and none other. Bissell and his associates pursued a risky course. Even under the best of circumstances travel by stage or canal boat was slow. The loss of one day out of seven proved to be a serious inconvenience to patrons and a substantial economic drain on the pioneer lines. This Sabbatarian experiment failed in a few years, but before it did Bissell helped generate a controversy of national proportions. The regulations of the United States Post Office required the carriage and delivery of mail seven days a week. Competing stage lines held an obvious advantage over the six-day line, which could not bid successfully for mail contracts.

To the pious, national policy seemed designed to frustrate the cause of Christian reform. Reaction to the injury done to Sabbatarianism reverberated throughout the country. In Philadelphia the influential Presbyterian leader Ezra Stiles

Ely delivered a sermon on "The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers . . ." in which he called for a Christian party in politics. Ely's Christian party was to contain only Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists, and was to insure the election of true believers so that no infidel would ever dishonor the United States Capitol. "Infidels, Jews, and Unitarians" could eventually be disfranchised.¹⁷

No national Christian party of the strength Ely desired was ever formed, but clergy and lay leaders did become increasingly politically oriented. In 1828 the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath, in which Josiah Bissell was a leading activist, began flooding the Congress with memorials and petitions for a change in the postal regulations.¹⁸ Major church organizations joined with the General Union in announcing special days "of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, with reference to the profanation of the Christian Sabbath."¹⁹ As countless sermons and prayer meetings were devoted to this theme, the pressure on Congress to act mounted. Finally, a Senate Committee headed by the flamboyant Jacksonian Democrat Richard M. Johnson gave its reply: "It is not the legitimate province of the Legislature to determine what religion is true, or what false. Our Government is a civil, and not a religious institution."²⁰

While the effort to ban transportation and delivery of the mails on Sunday was not immediately successful, Christian leaders in Rochester were not disheartened. It was the sort of defeat that made believers redouble their energies in the face of the apparent strength of their enemies. One of the main sources of orthodox zeal was the existence of spokesmen for a contrary point of view. Like Richard Johnson, many Americans opposed religious interference in civil affairs. Advocates of strict separation of church and state varied greatly in their religious beliefs. They included atheists, deists, Jews, Unitarians, Quakers, Catholics, and not-so-zealous Protestants of various stripes. Many, however, were

agnostics in the strict sense of that word -- they resisted final proofs of a Supreme Being and were even less convinced by human interpretations of God's will in human affairs. Whatever the religious convictions of the "freethinker" or "infidel," as he was called by the orthodox, one of his chief attributes was a fear of organized religious influence; in this the orthodox and the skeptic neatly balanced one another. Each had an exaggerated opinion of the other's influence and ambitions.

As we shall see, the Sunday mail issue was not the only secular area in which the Christian establishment obtruded itself. But the time has now come to turn to our main subject, Obediah Dogberry, the thorn in the side of Rochester's orthodox leadership.

A Freethought Newspaper

In February, 1832, less than a year after Charles G. Finney left Rochester, the first issue of the *Liberal Advocate* appeared. There was no mistaking the purpose of this new entry in the field of Rochester journalism. At the top of page one of the first issue, and of all subsequent issues, was printed the epigram, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan! The proper study of mankind in MAN."²¹ On page two the editor introduced himself with a set of "PROPOSALS for the LIBERAL ADVOCATE, By O. Dogberry, Esq." "This paper has been *translated* to this flourishing village," he wrote, "where it will hereafter be issued weekly from the Independent Press, at No. 24, in the Arcade." Dogberry's strong declaration of intent was that "EQUAL RIGHTS and FREE DISCUSSION will be fearlessly advocated and maintained. Sectarian *dogmas* or tenets will be investigated and compared." It was added that the terms to new subscribers to the journal would be one dollar per series (of sixteen issues) payable in advance, or after the eighth number.²²

No biographical information on Obediah Dogberry has survived, but it is known that he briefly edited the *Palmyra Reflector* in 1829-1830. This put Dogberry on the scene at the founding of the Mormon Church, and in fact the *Reflector* contains the earliest known commentary on Mormonism written by an outsider. Needless to say, the skeptical Obediah reserved some of his choicest barbs for Joseph Smith, Jr. and his followers. Despite the Mormons' best efforts to guard the manuscript of Smith's "Gold Bible," Dogberry somehow secured sections of it several months before official publication. During January, 1830 he published unauthorized excerpts and later exposed the book to withering satire.²³

Perhaps the activities of the Palmyra Mormons helped harden Dogberry's cynicism. After moving his printshop to Rochester the editor was antagonistic to all earthly prophets and purveyors of dogma. At the time of his arrival Rochester was still experiencing the effects of Finney's great revival. In his maiden editorial Dogberry observed,

Not since the days of Salem witchcraft did the philanthropist have greater causes to regret the weakness of human nature, when fanaticism accompanied with its parent superstition, is making rapid strides Peaceable and well meaning people are forced from their homes and vocations for the purpose of attending long **protracted** meetings to the neglect of their domestic concerns, while the gloom of despair sits brooding on every countenance and to add to the calamity, public as well as private tranquility and happiness, is too often interrupted, while pure and undefiled religion is grossly scandalized.²⁴

The following month Dogberry inserted a short notice below the heading "PROTRACTED MEETINGS." "A meeting under this *cognomen* is now and has been in operation for some two or three weeks, in this village. How long it will continue, or what success has, or will attend it, we are unable to tell."²⁵

Obediah Dogberry's patrons, the subscribers to his journal, shared his bias and sent frequent contributions telling of first-person experiences with religion. The patrons of the *Liberal Advocate* and the orthodox *Rochester Observer* had rather

different opinions on meetings, revivals, and conversion. To the orthodox, group prayer was a primary means of putting oneself in the way of salvation; to the freethinkers, these displays of fervor were at best an annoyance. The contrast is best illustrated by example.

Even while subscribers to the *Liberal Advocate* were reading Dogberry's brief notice on "PROTRACTED MEETINGS," the young believer Henry B. Stanton wrote to Theodore Weld on the revival at Third Presbyterian Church then in progress. "Many souls have been converted," wrote Stanton. "The work is very still but deep. About 8 or 10 or 12 take the anxious seat every night, but what is very remarkable about 3/4 usually submit to God Oh how good and kind Christ is -- but I am a miserable sinner."²⁶

The orthodox never tired of telling or hearing stories about the good accomplished during revivals. Typically, such stories were set in the most sentimental prose -- as in the story of the elder convert, recounted in the *Rochester Observer* and reproduced here in a greatly abbreviated fashion.

In a recent revival in the New England states, there were many unusual displays of sovereign grace. Several hardened men past the meridian of life, who had witnessed many seasons of refreshing unawakened, became as little children, and were admitted to the household of faith.

The wife of one old man prayed for spiritual intercession, so that her 70-year-old husband might "turn and live." According to the story, the results were not immediate, but "after a few days of great distress, the light seemed, unknown to himself, to be breaking on the mountains." Soon the man began attending every local prayer meeting, where the young converts "thronged about him, and gave utterance to the fullness of their joy." Before long the sinner joined in regular family prayer, "confessed Christ before men," and "gave his name to the Temperance Society, perceiving clearly now that it is of God."²⁷

To the freethinkers, protracted meetings and their resulting conversions were somewhat less agreeable. One

anonymous correspondent wrote to the *Liberal Advocate* to describe his experience with a movable prayer meeting.

A special edict was passed by the leading member of one of the gospel shops not long since, that the members of the aforesaid shop, should personally visit the dwellings of their friends and there offer up prayers for their safety

In the course of this special missionary activity, a prayer group called at the house of the correspondent. "Being naturally charitable in that way," he wrote, he gave leave for prayer. But,

while the farce was going on, I could but weep for my neighbors -- living as we do in the vicinity of the shop; not only obliged to have our sleep disturbed by their midnight carousels -- but have their folly individually administered: this is too much -- but this is not all.

Within a week after the prayer session ("probably after he thought it had time to operate") one of the Christian leaders called again upon the correspondent "to give a small trifle to the missionary fund."²⁸

Obediah Dogberry's friends delighted in ridiculing religious gullibility and enthusiasm. One of the most irreligious of the *Liberal Advocate's* regular correspondents was a man who signed his letters "S." "I happened to be present at one of these [gospel] meetings," he wrote, "when one of the converts addressed the assembly in substance as follows."

My friends and Brethren, I have seen my Creator, he was like! he was like! he was like! A **great lump** of gold, and Jesus Christ was with him, and beckoned me to come to him, but the Devil touched my elbow and said don't go M _____ don't go. Then Jesus Christ separated from the father -- came to me and **shook hands**, and said you must take up the cross and follow me, but the Devil twitched my elbow again, and said don't go M _____ don't go.

After holding forth in this strain for some time, wrote S., the meeting was dismissed, and the preacher on being asked how he could utter such blasphemy in public, replied, "Oh my friends, it was not with my carnal eye, but with my mind's eye

that I saw these things!" S. could only conclude that, "perhaps Chaos is the father of all."²⁹

It was commonly accepted that women were especially vulnerable to conversion and religious excess. There was doubtless much truth to this observation, not for the reason some contemporaries believed, that is, that women had weaker intellects, but because women were inhibited by a narrow role in social and economic life rigidly enforced by custom. In any case it was not uncommon for a wife to become a convert to enthusiastic religion, leaving an unconverted husband in a state of exasperation. One of Obediah Dogberry's correspondents who gave his name as "Anticlericus" wrote to say that "for a number of years, I neither envied 'Princes or palaces' for to me, 'there was no place like home.' But alas! the spider came, in the shape of an itinerant preacher, of revival memory." Since that time things had changed for the worse.

He **stuffed** my wife with tracts, and alarmed her fears, and nothing short of meetings, night and day, could atone for the many fold sins, my poor simple spouse had committed, and at the same time, she made the miraculous discovery, that she had been "unevenly yoked." From this unhappy period, peace, quiet, and happiness fled my dwelling, never, I fear, to return.

According to Anticlericus, "the Demons of discord, in the shape of Gossips, tract peddlers, etc." had perfectly consummated his misery.³⁰

Aside from religious questions, the topic most on the minds of Rochesterians during Obediah's first summer here was a cholera epidemic. The dread disease made its appearance early in July. As many as 1,000 persons fled the village temporarily, and by early September when the last fatality was recorded a total of 118 had died from the cholera's unpleasant effects.³¹ Throughout the summer the local newspapers, including the *Liberal Advocate*, were filled with columns of medical theory, criticism of public officials, and conflicting advice on recommended diets and medications.

But to say that cholera concerns pushed aside the normal preoccupation with religion would be far from the truth. In

fact, religious leaders seized on the opportunity to drive home a moral lesson. The epidemic was seen as a heavenly visitation, designed to cleanse the world of sinners. "Cholera sermons" became a routine staple of Sunday church services. In a letter to friends in Hartford, Connecticut, William Pitkin, a leading businessman and Christian layman, described the course of the disease.

The cholera on its first appearance here made temperate persons of debilitated habits its first victims, and until within a week those of intemperate and dissipated habits entirely escaped, but within the last three days numbers of that class have been hurried into eternity with but six or eight hours illness It does indeed demand of all to see that our Lamps are trim'd, and that we watch for the coming of our Lord There is no time now for death bed repentance.³²

In fairness to this point of view, it is appropriate to point out that scientific explanations of cholera and other epidemics were lacking in the 1830s. Medical spokesmen offered contradictory theories. Cholera was said to stem from the unhealthy "exhalations" of stagnant water, or to be the result of peculiar climatic conditions. A minority of expert opinion held that cholera was caused by an as-yet undiscovered microscopic organism or "animalcula," but this view was generally considered too theoretical. Also, the animalcula theory suggested that disease was "contagious" and could be "transmitted," ideas that had been common in the middle ages but which modern physicians felt were discredited. Rather than looking for outside organisms to explain causation, most doctors and laymen alike leaned heavily on "predisposition" -- the common sense idea that certain individuals were more likely than others to develop a disease. One could become more or less predisposed by cautious behavior or the lack of it. In the case of cholera, a disorder of the digestive organs, physicians stressed diet, fresh air, and the avoidance of excitement. Fresh fruits and vegetables (known to make digestion difficult) were cautioned against as disease agents in

the "cholera season." Whiskey and cider, notorious enemies of the digestion, were considered deadly.

Thus the prevailing practical views on cholera dovetailed neatly with theological considerations. If the cholera wasn't a direct supernatural phenomenon, it was at least a righteous disease, for it attacked the intemperate and dissolute -- drinkers, overeaters, and those who recklessly excited their stomachs at cards, horse racing, and other diversions. Obediah Dogberry and his freethinking supporters ought to have felt chastised, according to Christian leaders, since their anti-religious arguments weakened the ordinary moral strictures.

On the contrary, however: Obediah and friends used the cholera as an argument for *their* beliefs; if excitement was a well-known agent of cholera, then religious zealotry surely had been a predisposing factor. Rochester was being visited, not with the wages of sin, but of fanaticism! Judging from the evidence, Obediah Dogberry was sincere in his belief that cholera sermons increased the incidence of disease. "We understand that in Montreal, Quebec, New York, etc., that an increased number of cases of the Cholera have uniformly appeared on Mondays," he wrote. "This is attributed to large numbers congregating on Sundays inhaling a fetid atmosphere and having their minds predisposed to disease, by listening to the wild rant of some fanatic."³³

In a similarly irreligious vein Dogberry excerpted a "cholera sermon" copied from an eastern freethought journal.

Behold ye men of Bason and of Baal, and straightaway give heed unto me, for the **Cholera** is at hand; -- O weep and howl ye sinners bound to destruction! -- ye vessels of wrath and cumberers of the ground! Sound an alarm in the camp of Israel! for the Cholera I say is at hand . . . fall upon thy knees ye men of little faith, and beg us **saints** to cry mightily to God for you, that your souls might be saved from an awful **hell**, and your bodies from the dreadful **Cholera** . . . Weep, howl, groan, ye great and small, for he that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved, but he that believeth not, hell fire and cholera, shall be your portions. -- Amen.³⁴

The *Liberal Advotat*e's subscribers shared its editor's contempt for those who recklessly spread fear of cholera, "Q. Q." a regular correspondent in Henrietta, contributed a facetious account of the cholera alarm in his rural town. One of his neighbors, a "Mrs. Sanctity," recently ran "panting and bolting" along to her husband. The woman hysterically advised the family to flee.

Yes, Granny Long-visage hast jist tell'd me that there never was sich a judgement of God's wrath poured out on the ungodly afore. She says its sartinly immortal to every single one it attracts, except the penitent -- oh dear, she told me that more than twenty thousand died every day for more than forty days in Montreal, and about fifteen thousand in Quebec . . . It is as sartin as can be, for she was told so by Mr. Blab, who has seen a Mr. Lambswool, who heard a Mr. Timothy somebody read it in the newspapers.³⁵

According to Q. Q., Mrs. Sanctity continued in this vein for some time until frightened senseless by a black raincloud on the horizon -- which she concluded must be the approaching epidemic.

The cholera and the opportunities for satire it afforded lasted only a season, but other issues remained perennial points of conflict between Dogberry and the Christian establishment. One such issue was the temperance cause, whose advocates even before 1830 had gone beyond calling for moderation and had begun demanding abstinence from all alcoholic beverages. The charge to avoid stimulating beverages was sometimes carried even further. In a letter to a friend written in 1830 Josiah Bissell announced that ". . . I have got beyond Temperance to the *Cold Water Society* -- no *Tea, Coffee* or any other *Slops* -- only pure *Water* to drink & *Coarse fare* to Eat & my health perfectly good & *Spirits* improving" ³⁶

The Rochester *Observer* also looked for new areas to apply the temperance principle. The Christian newspaper supported and reported the activities of a newly formed Anti-Tobacco Society in the village. Most members held the "serious opinion" that the use of tobacco was an evil, since it "often led

to the habit of intemperate drinking.” But the Anti-Tobacco Society had an uphill battle. The *Observer* itself, describing the Society’s first meeting, reported that

one of the first objects which attracted our attention on entering the room, was a man having a huge pipe in his mouth, and another in his hand, having evidently come prepared to take part in the discussion What proportion of those present were in the habit of using tobacco . . . might easily have been ascertained by counting the puddles of saliva in front of the members. It appeared that all but three or four were chewers or smokers.

One gentleman in attendance worried that “if this disposition to break off from old habits was not opposed, it would by and by lead people to abstain from food.”³⁷ Perhaps in this case the idea became father to the thought; four months later the *Observer* speculated on the positive results if every villager reduced his weekly dining by twenty-five cents. A total savings of \$200,000 a year could be realized -- including “half the support of 30 physicians a year at, say \$1,000 each.”³⁸

Temperance advocates, while toying with the food and tobacco problems, zealously fought the use of liquor. One of the most vigorous lay organizations was the Monroe County Temperance Society, which by 1831 counted over 3,000 members.³⁹ In 1827 the Ontario Presbytery, which included the Rochester churches, adopted a total abstinence resolution.⁴⁰ The temperance issue reached a minor climax in 1832, when for the first time an attempt was made to block issuance of licenses to local whiskey dealers.⁴¹

Obediah Dogberry was decidedly a “wet,” but the temperance issue brought out some of his most thoughtful comments. In the first of several appeals to “temperance in opinion,” Dogberry wrote,

We hold, and with justice too, that the man or woman who is under the necessity of entering into a “solemn league and compact” for the purpose of keeping themselves **sober**, deserve but little credit Who are the most temperate men of modern times? -- those who quaff the juice of the grape with their friends, with the greatest good nature, after the manner of the ancient patriarchs, without any malice in their hearts, or the cold-water, pale-faced

money-making men, who make the necessities of their neighbors, their opportunity for grinding the face of the poor? Can the man who flies in a passion at the least contradiction, be called a temperate man?⁴²

After residing in Rochester the better part of a year and giving the matter further reflection, Dogberry offered the opinion that there were other kinds of intemperance besides the abuse of opium or alcohol. "Passion may often have a similar effect, while a man who possesses neither *rhyme* or reason, may be considered intoxicated, at all times and seasons."⁴³ The editor offered as his alternative to abstinence pledges a forthright advocacy of public education.

Let the children of the poor be educated; let books of useful knowledge be placed within their reach; let them learn that men are born free and equal; teach them by precept and example that they must live and die like honest men, and our word for it; there will be but few rapes, murders or suicides, committed from **intemperance**.⁴⁴

Another perennial point of dispute between orthodox Protestants and the freethinkers was the issue of toleration; each side accused the other of having none. If the matter is to be judged by each side's treatment of third parties, then Obediah Dogberry and his friends must be given the distinction of being the less intolerant of the two -- but not by a wide margin.

Orthodox spokesmen delighted in attacking religious opponents, and in reading about the horrible errors of Roman Catholicism, Universalism, or rationalism. The *Observer* was particularly severe on Catholicism, which it termed "popery" and attacked in a series of articles with titles like "Popish Superstitions" and "Conversion of a Roman Catholic Lady." The criticisms were so scurrilous that the Reverend Michael McNamara was moved to make a written reply, but his challenge of a public debate was not taken up.⁴⁵

Soon after Obediah Dogberry's arrival in the village he copied a brief item from the *Observer* in the *Liberal Advocate*. The *Observer's* latest anti-Catholic excess was a comment on

ashen marks seen on the foreheads of "Catholic females," which reminded the Protestant editor "of those passages in Revelation which mention about a mark being applied to the worshippers of the Beast." To Dogberry this was too much. Below the reprinted item Dogberry added his own "REMARKS":

We are constrained to say that the article in the **Observer** savors of uncharitableness, and the writer evinces great ignorance of the venerable superstitions of our ancestors The [Ash Wednesday] ceremonies aforesaid, like many others are simply (if we understand the matter) to remind us of our frail condition by nature, and that "dust thou art and to dust must return."⁴⁶

Both Dogberry and his opponents frequently resorted to arguments from history to support their positions. Dogberry in particular was fond of treating his readers to historical anecdotes. Typical was his account of George Whitefield's visit to Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1740. Whitefield was the great itinerant revivalist and spokesman for Methodism said to have triggered New England's "Great Awakening." In Saybrook, according to Dogberry, Whitefield promised to bring down the fort there like Joshua at Jericho, "to convince the gaping multitude of his divine mission." The English minister walked seven times around the fort with prayer and ram's horns blowing . . . "but the angel was deaf, or on a journey, or asleep, and therefore the walls remained." Whereupon Whitefield declared that the town was "accursed for not receiving the messenger of the Lord . . . He *shook off* the dust of his feet against them, and departed, and went to Lyme."⁴⁷

Among Obediah Dogberry's favorite stories were accounts of Christian intolerance, set during the Spanish Inquisition or in the seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony. On the subject of the Salem witch trials, Dogberry wrote,

Unfortunately our emigrating forefathers were prone to belief in a direct personal intercourse with the Devil and his liege subjects Actuated by this strange belief, we soon find them "doing God's service" by **executing twenty men and women** as bewitched persons, besides a poor dog that was charged with partaking in their "infernal practices."⁴⁸

In the editor's mind, latter day manifestations of religious persecution could be found behind the schemes of Sabbatarians, temperance advocates, Sunday School organizers, and his own critics. After publishing the *Liberal Advocate* for nine months, Dogberry's evaluation of his own contribution was that he supplied needed correctives to "the senseless lucubrations of distempered imaginations" and the "sophistical reasoning of the more designing and hypocritical demagogue." He asked the reader to appreciate that

it needed no common nerve to conduct a paper that should have any pretension to INDEPENDENCE. We rejoice however to be able to say, that notwithstanding all the un-Christian opposition (not to call its persecution) we have received at the hands of bigoted ignoramuses, our success has at least equalled our anticipation.⁴⁹

But Dogberry's chief difficulty during the two and a half years he published the *Liberal Advocate* proved to be not persecution, but a long list of uncollected subscriptions. It was a perennial problem shared with other editor-publishers in those days of easy-going credit and scarce currency. Obediah suffered the misfortune of starting publication when Rochester and its surrounding region were in the midst of a recession brought on by business failures following over-expansion in the 1820s.⁵⁰ Debts were widely neglected during such times, and some amounts owed -- like trifling debts to editors -- were more difficult to collect than others. At an early stage Dogberry began inserting notices calling for his delinquents to *pony up*.⁵¹

A typical notice which appeared in the *Liberal Advocate* in September, 1832, read as follows:

The Cholera and its concomitants, have prevented our paying attention to a certain sort of **Folks**, who have not as yet become sufficiently NOTORIOUS, they need not despair, we shall ERE long, give their NAMES to FAME.⁵²

After repeating the warning several times, Dogberry finally published his first "BLACK LIST" in heavy Gothic type. "It is not our intention to injure the feelings of any *honest* man," he

wrote. "Should it so fall out, that any mistake has occurred . . . ample justice shall be done to the party aggrieved."⁵³ We can be fairly confident that Dogberry chose with special care the first four names of delinquent subscribers to be published.

Repeated use of the black list apparently had little effect. In the last issue of the *Liberal Advocate* Dogberry wrote, "Pitt said that 'money was the sinews of war,' and in our times we find it in truth, 'the one thing needful.' We mean to *insinuate* that many of our patrons, although respectable men in society, are grossly negligent in paying their *dues*." Despite this discouraging state of affairs, the editor promised to begin a new series the following month, in December, 1834. The first number of the new series was to appear "about the *Holy Days*, when we hope to wish our friends a 'Merry Christmas' and we fervently hope that during this short *interregnum*, our delinquent subscribers will not forget that we want MONEY, and must have it."⁵⁴

With this final appeal for cash, the sum of Obediah Dogberry's writings runs out. If publication of the *Liberal Advocate* was resumed, no copies of the promised new series have survived.⁵⁵ But Obediah's financial difficulties, as we have indicated, were typical in the early nineteenth century newspaper business, and his journal's survival for more than two and a half years was respectable. In one area Dogberry could boast of a fair degree of success; by July, 1832 the *Liberal Advocate* displayed a full page of advertisements, as did most subsequent issues.

The quantity of advertising space purchased in the *Liberal Advocate*, and in some cases the advertisements themselves, reflect Dogberry's support among the village freethinkers. When Gardner McCracken, one of three pioneer brothers who settled on Rochester's northwest side, inserted an announcement that the stallion Black Hawk would stand during the season, he of course appended a lengthy discussion of the animal's pedigree. But McCracken felt constrained to add, "[Black Hawk] can trot twelve miles an hour with ease;

his running speed remains untried, and probably will until the superstition and hypocrisy of our illiberal pretended republican State is willing to grant equal rights to its constituents.”⁵⁶ The reminder of the then-current prohibition on horse racing was similar to the mildly sardonic comment found in another advertisement: “The Rochester Theatre has been *metamorphosed* into a *splendid* livery stable, where Coaches, Barouches, Gigs, Sulkies, Waggon, and saddle horses may be had on the shortest notice.”⁵⁷

The most extraordinary advertisement in the *Liberal Advocate*, and one which other local papers may not have been willing to accept for publication, was inserted by a Mrs. Sarah Wrigley in the summer of 1834. Mrs. Wrigley’s notice began with a denunciation of James (or Jemmy) Love, her “quondam husband,” for “posting” her in the public prints. “As for his credit,” Sarah wrote,

he was never worth a brass farthing. By his board, perhaps he means eatables, which consisted chiefly of the offals of the slaughter house, but possibly he means the board he split over my head, of which the Magistrate can give an account.

The notice closed with an announcement that Sarah Wrigley keeps a small grocery on Buffalo Street, run on “American principles” -- despite Jemmy Love and his modern Whiggish principles. Finally, “I sign the name I bore while living with my first and only loved husband.”⁵⁸

By providing space for advertisements such as these which reflected the nonconforming impulses of at least some of the village’s inhabitants, Obediah Dogberry’s newspaper supplied a real service. Without the forum for opposition supplied by the *Liberal Advocate* during those tumultuous years, Rochester’s energetic orthodox establishment would have pursued its ends with little open criticism. Whether the jabs of Obediah Dogberry and his friends had any real effect on the course of events is a moot question, but the very existence of a freethought journal in Rochester at the time was a healthy sign of diversity in opinion, and a measure of the rapid transition towards a truly urban culture.

At the same time the style of debate between believers and the irreligious in the 1830s might seem harsh to twentieth century sensibilities. Indeed, Dogberry was fully capable of denouncing Protestant "priestcraft" with the same scurrilous intensity which Protestants reserved for "Papists" and "infidels." Anti-religious as well as religious convictions were strongly held in those days; the wonder is that Dogberry sometimes achieved a light humor when discussing the behavior of the orthodox. After one Fourth of July, Dogberry noted with scorn the refusal of the churches to ring their bells for the recent anniversary of American Independence. "The orthodox have determined to ring bells only for calling the *flock*." Obediah observed that

[the bells] still make considerable clatter on week days, but on Sundays, as few of the congregations assemble at the same hour, the solemn ding dong kept up by the different churches is sufficient to drive reason from her empire o'er the mind, of a weak and sickly person whose nerves are easily affected by such "doleful sounds."⁵⁹

The circumstances which produced the religious conflict peculiar to the 1820s and 1830s in Rochester were soon changed. Although religion would continue to play a central role in the life of the community, the city's growing cosmopolitan character frustrated the attempt to recreate a New England theocracy here. Even during the *Liberal Advocate's* publication, the presence of Catholicism, Quakerism, Universalism, and other minority religions was a forecast of a new diversity which demanded accommodation rather than denunciation. Moreover, the revivalistic ardor of orthodox Protestantism itself was fading. Protracted meetings, emotional conversions, and the excess which they generated would soon be rejected as distasteful by most Christians. Obediah Dogberry disappeared from the scene shortly before his usefulness was gone, but left behind a vivid record of freethought in Rochester during the last years of village life.

NOTES

1. Obediah Dogberry's improbable **cognomen**, as he would call it, was very likely a pen name. However, evidence to indicate that the editor had any other name is lacking. If "Obediah Dogberry" was a literary conceit, then Dogberry (the bumbling constable described as "the solemn ass" in **Much Ado About Nothing**) could tolerate a joke at his own expense.
2. Albert Post, **Popular Freethought in America 1825 - 1850** (New York, 1943), pp. 11-74. Of the 27 freethought journals studied by Post, only 5 -- including Dogberry's -- were produced in the west.
3. The federal census of 1830 recorded a population of 9,207; a local census in 1834 counted 12,252. On the New England contribution to early Rochester Protestantism see Rev. Orlo J. Price, "One Hundred Years of Protestantism in Rochester," Rochester Historical Society **Publication Fund Series**, Vol. XII (1933), p. 244. Yankee migration into western New York is discussed in detail in Whitney R. Cross, **The Burned-over District** (Ithaca, N.Y., 1950), pp. 4-6, 15-18, 71.
4. Blake McKelvey, **Rochester, The Water Power City 1812-1854** (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), pp. 126-129; Price, "One Hundred Years of Protestantism," pp. 247-258. On the cooperative spirit among Protestant denominations see Charles I. Foster, **An Errand of Mercy; The Evangelical United Front 1790-1837** (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1960).
5. Bernard A. Weisberger, **They Gathered at the River** (Boston, 1958), pp. 87-159; Alice Felt Tyler, **Freedom's Ferment** (Univ. of Minnesota, 1944), pp. 23-45. Evangelism permeated American social history in the early nineteenth century, and much has been written and said on the subject. Perhaps the single best source on the conversion experience is the autobiography of Charles G. Finney himself, Finney, **Memoirs** (New York, 1876) which includes two chapters on his activities in Rochester. See also H. Pomeroy Brewster, "The Magic of a Voice; Rochester Revivals of Rev. Charles G. Finney," **RHS Publication Fund Series**, Vol. IV (1925), pp. 273-290.
6. Price, "One Hundred Years of Protestantism," p. 244.
7. Edward R. Foreman, ed., "Summary of the Population of Rochester," **RHS Publication Fund Series**, Vol. X (1931), p. 262.
8. Elisha Ely, **Directory for the Village of Rochester** (Rochester, 1827), p. 114.
9. McKelvey, **Water Power City**, pp. 71-107, 136-162.
10. Price, "One Hundred Years of Protestantism," pp. 245-246.
11. **Ibid**, pp. 247-256.
12. Rochester **Republican**, January 31, 1832.
13. Henry O'Reilly, **Sketches of Rochester** (Rochester, 1838), p. 299.
14. "Secretary's Record of the Proceedings of the Monroe County Bible Society 1821-1883" (ms journal in Rochester Public Library). Bible and tract distribution was conducted nationally on a large scale by such organizations as the American Bible Society, of which the Monroe County group was a local section. Foster, **An Errand of Mercy**, pp. 85-91, 121-123. On the importance of the Bible in early nineteenth century of Protestantism see Stewart G. Cole, **The History of Fundamentalism** (New York, 1931), pp. 10-11 and **passim**.
15. O'Reilly, **Sketches of Rochester**, pp. 294-295; Price, "One Hundred Years of Protestantism," pp. 263.

16. McKelvey, **Water Power City**, pp. 188-189.
17. Ezra Stiles Ely, **The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers: A Discourse delivered on the fourth of July, 1827, in the Seventh Presbyterian Church, in Philadelphia** (Philadelphia, 1828), pp. 11, 14.
18. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., **The Age of Jackson** (Boston, 1945), pp. 137-138.
19. Rochester **Observer**, November 5, 1830.
20. Richard M. Johnson, **Report on the Transportation of the Mail on Sunday**, pp. 5-6, quoted in Schlesinger, **Age of Jackson**, p. 139.
21. From Alexander Pope's **An Essay on Man**, Epistle I.
22. Rochester **Liberal Advocate**, February 23, 1832.
23. Palmyra **Reflector**, January 2, 13, 27; June 30, 1830. See M. Hamlin Cannon, "Contemporary Views of Mormon Origins (1830)," **Mississippi Valley Historical Review** Vol. XXXI (September, 1944), No. 2, pp. 261-266. Cannon believes that Obediah Dogberry was the originator of the nick-name "Gold Bible." According to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the **Book of Mormon** was not authored, but translated by Joseph Smith, Jr. However, the title page of the first edition of the **Book of Mormon** contains the line, "By Joseph Smith, Junior, Author and Proprietor."
24. **Liberal Advocate**, February 23, 1832.
25. **Liberal Advocate**, March 3, 1832.
26. Gilbert H. Barnes and D.L. Dumond, **Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke**. (New York, 1934), pp. 70-71.
27. Copied from the New York **Evangelist** by the Rochester **Observer**, September 17, 1830.
28. **Liberal Advocate**, October 13, 1832.
29. **Liberal Advocate**, September 1, 1832.
30. **Liberal Advocate**, September 29, 1832.
31. McKelvey, **Water Power City**, pp. 180-181.
32. William Pitkin to friends in Hartford, August 16, 1832, published in Blake McKelvey, ed., "Letters Postmarked Rochester 1817-1879," **RHS Publication Fund Series**, Vol. XXI (1943), p. 40.
33. **Liberal Advocate**, August 4, 1832.
34. **Liberal Advocate**, July 28, 1832.
35. **Liberal Advocate**, September 1, 1832.
36. Josiah Bissell to Gerrit Smith, April 28, 1830, published in "Letters Postmarked Rochester," p. 35.
37. **Observer**, October 23, 1829.
38. **Observer**, March 19, 1830.
39. Rochester **Enquirer**, June 14, 1831.

40. McKelvey, **Water Power City**, p. 133.
41. Earlier attempts had been made to halt liquor sales on Sunday. **Ibid**, p. 192.
42. **Liberal Advocate**, March 3, 1832.
43. **Liberal Advocate**, September 15, 1832.
44. **Ibid**
45. **Observer**, April 16, 1830.
46. **Liberal Advocate**, March 10, 1832.
47. **Liberal Advocate**, October 13, 1832.
48. **Liberal Advocate**, September 15, 1832.
49. **Liberal Advocate**, November 3, 1832.
50. McKelvey, **Water Power City**, pp. 163-167.
51. **Liberal Advocate**, November 3, 1832.
52. **Liberal Advocate**, September 1, 1832.
53. **Liberal Advocate**, October 6, 1832.
54. **Liberal Advocate**, November 22, 1834.
55. Apparently only two depositories have collections of the **Liberal Advocate**. The Rochester Public Library's collection includes many numbers down to June 21, 1834. The library of the New-York Historical Society has a more complete collection which includes the last number cited above.
56. **Liberal Advocate**, March 22, 1834.
57. **Liberal Advocate**, July 14, 1832.
58. **Liberal Advocate**, August 2, 1834.
59. **Liberal Advocate**, July 14, 1832.